**Make the Announcement**

To participate in a primary, the person running for office must become a declared candidate. This can happen in several ways. The most common is **self-announcement**, also known as throwing your hat into the ring. Candidates simply declare their interest in seeking election to a public office. Self-announcement is usually done at a press conference or other public event. In 2007, Hillary Clinton chose to self-announce her candidacy for president on her website.

Before making an official announcement, however, the candidate may form an **exploratory committee**. This is a group of advisers who evaluate the candidate’s chances of election and advise the candidate on whether or not they should run. For presidential candidates, announcements are sometimes made as early as two years before the election.

**Form a Campaign Organization**

To win elective office, candidates must run a well-organized campaign. In most cases, this requires a campaign organization. These organizations vary in size and complexity, depending on the race.

Running for a city council seat might require a very small, local campaign organization. This group might consist of no more than a volunteer campaign manager and a treasurer (person who handles the money). The candidate works with this small team to write speeches, print posters, and manage other details of the campaign.

Running for president, on the other hand, demands a large, complex organization. A presidential race requires the services of hundreds, of people, from unpaid volunteers to highly paid campaign professionals. A presidential campaign organization would also have offices in every state. Of course, to set up and run such an organization requires money.

**Build a War Chest**

Without money a political campaign cannot survive long. This is true at all levels, whether the candidate is running for a local office or for president of the United States.

At the start of a campaign, candidates typically spend a great deal of time and energy raising money the old-fashioned way. They “dial for dollars,” getting on the phone to ask associates and supporters for money. They hold fundraisers, such as $1,000-a-plate dinners, to get contributions from major donors. They also organize direct-mail campaigns and set up websites designed to attract funds from large numbers of small donors.

If a candidate’s fundraising efforts are successful, the campaign will build up a **war chest**, or funds that can be used to move the campaign forward. During presidential campaigns, the candidate with the largest war chest is often considered the front-runner.

**Develop a Strategy**

To prepare for primaries and caucuses (which you will find out about in a few minutes), candidates must develop a campaign strategy. If this plan of action works well and the candidate wins the nomination, some of that strategy may carry over to the general election. Key elements of a strategy include tone, theme, and targeting.

Tone – Candidates must decide whether to adopt a positive or negative tone for their campaigns. This means figuring how much time and money to spend stressing the positive things about themselves and how much to spend criticizing their opponents.

Theme – Every candidate needs a theme – a simple appealing idea that gets repeated over and over. A theme helps distinguish a candidate from his or her opponents in the primaries. When Barak Obama ran for president in 2008 his theme was simply “Change.”

Targeting – Candidates must also decide whether to target specific groups of voters. Is there any group – blue collar workers, women, the middle class, the elderly – that is particularly unhappy with the status quo? IF so, that group is a likely target for specially designed appeals from candidates.

**Run in Primaries and Caucuses**

In most states, the road to nomination is the primary election. If they win this election, they go on to face the nominees of other parties in the general election held later that year. But some states use a different method: the party caucus. A caucus is a closed meeting of people from one political party who will select candidates.

In a caucus state, small groups of party members meet in their communities to discuss the various candidates. Each caucus then chooses delegates to represent its views at the party’s state convention. Approximately a dozen states hold caucuses. The best known are the Iowa caucuses, which take place early in presidential election years. The Iowa caucuses are watched closely, because they provide the first indication of how well each candidate is doing at winning the support of average voters.

**Accept the Nomination at the National Convention**

A few months before the presidential election, the Democratic and Republican parties each hold a national convention in a major American city. In the past, party conventions were a critical step in the nomination process. Party delegates would argue over the candidates, sometimes going through several ballots before picking a nominee.

Today, however, presidential nominees are chosen through the primary and caucus process. The winner then announces his or her choice for vice president. The national convention has, as a result, evolved into a ritual to formally announce the party nominees and present them to the nation. The nominees also work with party leaders to frame a platform, laying out the party’s position on major issues. In addition, the convention helps unite the party and excite its followers.